The Cushion Saw the Window

a story by Brooks Kohler

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by Brooks Kohler (2025)

Written and published in the United States

Published by Brooks Kohler

This story is fiction. Similarities to any person living or deceased are a coincidence.

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PART i

Chapter 1

Taf gave me the impression she did not want me around. So I went out into the begging night of the city to be with the people who have no particular place to go or be.

Walking the crowded sidewalk, I felt at home. Billboard lights flashed. Traffic lights changed. Cars honked, and hustlers found places to stand.

I dug for a pack of cigarettes in my coat pocket and palmed a light.

As I walked, the smoke from the cigarette curled my cheek and caught the attention of a prostitute wearing high cut shorts with a top in the colors of the American flag. She rushed up behind me and asked to bum a smoke. I pulled out my pack and shook loose a cigarette. Like a gentleman, I

struck a match and held the flame to her cool, patient lips as she churned the cherry to a bright orange. She thanked me and hurried back from where she came.

Chapter 2

The sounds of a small bar caught my attention. Its neon lights marked the way. I nuzzled up to a stool and asked the cutie serving drinks for a beer. She reminded me of Taf – short, firm, and poured into jeans.

I always order beer because it is easy, cheap, and fast. Some people dive into a bar pretending to want to drink. They order something fanciful that requires a Ph.D. It might look impressive, but it takes forever. Just give me a beer. Give it quickly. Then serve me another, then another, and another until my nose begins to numb, and my face warms.

Chapter 3

Sometime before Midnight, myself and my spinning head staggered in through the door of the apartment only to find Taf on the couch with her friend Sandra who lived a few doors down from us. The TV was on, and they were nude. Most men go full erect at such a sight, but I do not. I see it so often it is the norm.

Taf asked, “Are you drunk, Ian?”
I replied, “Maybe.”
“I told you,” she said.

Across the room was a chair I salvaged from a curb on trash day. It was a good chair. The kind of chair made for sleeping. I tried to make it to it, but I fell down on the floor instead.

Hours later, I woke up in bed with naked Taf beside me and naked Sandra beside Taf. I had my clothes on, but my shoes were off. Somehow these two petite, nubile women managed to drag my

dead weight to the bed. I knew right then and there if they wanted, they had the ability to kill me and dump my body some place.

Chapter 4

Taf might not care if I live or die, but she loves money. A few months back, I landed a job working as a DJ at a strip club within walking distance of our apartment. Combined with the money I earned from sounding a like a drunken game show host and hers from nude webcamming, we have enough money to pay rent and sometimes go out.

Chapter 5

As strange as it might sound, Taf hates cellphones. She needs the Internet to cam but insist on using a landline for phone calls.

There she is, day after day, taking the mystery

out of what there is to see while at the same time complaining social media is the ruination of the planet.

"I don't mind the Internet," she says. "What I can't stand are the slum lords that took over."

You have to be totally immersed in her way of thinking to understand her arguments. She views social media sites as apartment buildings for thoughts and the owners of the social media sites as cyber slumlords who make money by pilfering through the thoughts left in the apartments.

Apparently, others feel the same way she does. Part of Taf's appeal to her followers are her arguments she shares while on cam.

Chapter 6

It was my night to work at the club. I arrived early to make sure I had the songs I needed and to

wash down a few beers to prime my voice.

Being a DJ at a strip club is on the job training. Nothing compares to it. They hire you because you have a radio voice. The rest is up to you.

Alone in the booth, I am the conductor. I dim the lights. I raise the lights. I introduce the girls and do my best to make each introduction sound as though it is their first.

On a good night, things go smoothly. I enter the small black room of the DJ booth and take on the role of a wizard. The girls bring me the list of songs they want to dance to and their complaints are few. The beer is cold and the ashtray clean.

On a bad night, anything is possible.

One night, I saw a dancer become so angry at a drunk trying to lick her leg, she roundhouse

kicked him and sent him flying into the floor. The man survived, but he filed a complaint and tried to sue the club. I learned later the dancer had a temper and took classes in self-defense. The guy who tried to lick her got hit by a car while taking a whiz in traffic. Maybe there is justice after all.

No sooner do I enter the club, than Jim the owner calls my name. He sits at the bar like a king holding court and wants to know what I plan to do about the humming sound coming out of the speakers. I light up a cigarette and sit down next to him.

"It's a loose wire," I say.

Jim takes my answer and slides his ashtray to me. He then taps the bar and a beer lands before me. I take a sip. He stands up and walks away.

Chapter 7

When I got home from the club, I found Taf on the floor wearing sweat pants and a bra. She had the TV on and between her legs an ice pack.

She reached out to me, and as I approached, pulled me down beside her.

“Ian, I think I need to see a doctor.”

I knew something was terribly wrong because when the cigarette dangling from my lips let go of its granny ash Taf said nothing about the ash or the smell of beer oozing from my body.

Part of me wanted to nervous chuckle, but the part that cared pulled her close to me. For the rest of the night, we cuddled ourselves into a sweaty sleep.

Chapter 8

The next day, Taf hurt so bad she had trouble

walking. It took nearly two hours, but I managed to get her to a walk-in clinic where a little old lady doctor told her she had an allergic reaction to a condom and a heat rash.

The rash was so bad, it spread down her legs, and caused her inner thighs to blister. When the doctor began to lecture Taf on sex safety, Taf let her know about the way she earned money and the vibrating saddle.

The doctor looked at me with an inquisitive look. “A vibrating saddle? What’s that?”

“It’s a seat,” I replied.

“It’s a thing I straddle,” interrupted Taf. “It’s got a dildo poking up out of it.”

“And she sits on the dildo?”

“She does.”

This doctor might of been a day over eighty, but when the thought of this short, petite girl in front of her riding a dildo hit her, she chuckled and

said, “You need to find a different kind of work.”

Taf turned to me. Anger was in her eyes. She jumped off the examination table and reached for her pants. The next thing I know, she was in the lobby doubled over in pain.

The doctor gave her a prescription for some ointment, and we hobbled into the street.

Chapter 9

Unable to work, Taf spent the next few days lounging on the couch. With no cellphone to play with she got bored and decided to come with me to the club.

Immediately upon entering, all eyes turned to her. Taf looked amazing. She wore a pair of jeans as if they were chiseled on her. Every man in the place took notice, and Jim motioned us over.

As Taf took a seat beside him, Jim tapped the bar. I took my free beer and reached for the ashtray. Taf ordered a drink Jim recommended, and I spun around to get a look at the stage.

It was early in the evening. The show had not yet begun. The girls were on the stage cleaning the poles while a few regulars watched.

Harry, an old drunk, who wondered in from time to time sat alone at a table smoking a cigarette and sipping liquor from a glass. Some people called him 1950 because he wore a fedora and black detective style dress suit.

Stepping away from the bar, I lit my cigarette and made my way to Harry's table. Without asking, I sat down beside him. He never noticed. He just stared at the stage. I slouched back in my chair and blew out a cannon's plume of smoke.

He was a fascinating man. His eyes were silver,

and his face had a somber gaze found on those who cared nothing for the world they were in. I heard at one time he had a big business and lost it all to booze and a life worth writing about. I leaned in thinking he might say a word, but he just kept his eyes on the stage.

Frustrated, I prepared to stand.

“Your girl dance?” he asked.
“Not yet,” I replied.
“Well, tonight might be the night.”

In my time forgetting about the club and the table, I also forgot about Taf who when I looked up was on the stage talking with one of the girls and getting a lesson in how to spin on a pole.

Excusing myself, I rushed back to Jim. He must of known what was on my mind because he smiled.

"She gonna do it?" I asked.

"Thinking about it," he replied.

I smashed out my cigarette, gulped down the last of my beer, and ordered a new one.

Chapter 10

There are only a few things I want out of life – a good night's sleep is one of them, but when we got home from the club, Taf was so wound up from the free drinks half a dozen guys bought her, she dragged me over to Sandra's apartment.

As soon as the door open, I burst in like a zombie in search of brains. Straight to the couch I hurried and collapsed beside some guy Sandra had over. The guy got mad, stood up, and yelled.

The next thing I know Sandra is hyperventilating, Taf is in a shouting match with the guy, and the guy was in Taf's face calling her a

slut for webcamming.

As I stated, all I wanted was a good night's sleep, but in my downtime on the cushions I caught a second wind and jumped up ready to tune a fiddle.

Before the guy had a chance to tell me where to go, I hit him so hard across the face his jaw popped. Sandra and Taf both looked at me. Sandra rushed to the guy who was now on the floor, and Taf said nothing. She just kept staring as though I used the Moon for a gong.

Chapter 11

Back at the apartment, Taf pounced on me. We rolled around for a few hours before realizing what we done.

Sex was something rare if ever between us. I looked upon Taf as more of a buddy than partner.

She looked great. God gave her the gift to make a blind man see, but her cold nature and my ability to ruin most things caused the part of my mind once capable of becoming close to someone to shut her out. Still, the urge existed, and when she kicked the apartment door shut and pushed me to the couch, I knew inhibition left the room.

Chapter 12

It was going on 10 in the morning when I woke up. Through the wall I heard the muffled sounds of Taf reading from one of her anti-technology books. She was on cam catching the wave of digital insomniacs from across the pond.

I laid in bed sprawled out naked on a white sheet staring at the ceiling. I looked like an unfurled Roman at a toga party. I rubbed my cock for a second or two and figured I might as well start the day.

At the little market down the street from our apartment, I purchased a box of cereal, some fruit for Taf, and a gallon jug of beer sold in a plastic milk carton jug. When I arrived back at the apartment, I presented Taf with the Jug as if it were a present. She fail short of surprise.

Toweling off from a shower, she stormed about the rooms ranting about how stupid I was to buy a gallon of beer.

"Who drinks that stuff, Ian?" she asked.

"I don't know," I muttered. "It was cheap. I figured it was worth trying."

"Go back down there, and get your money back." As I left the apartment she shouted, "Bring back milk!"

Chapter 13

There is little to no remorse in Taf. To better understand her one only needs to know about her

upbringing. The problem is her upbringing is a mystery.

One story about her childhood involved growing up in a big city in the East. If you asked her if it were New York, she replied, “No.” Chicago? She replied, “No.” Boston? “No!” And, then she added, “Definitely not Boston.”

Due to her response, I had a suspicion it was Boston, but with Taf, you never knew.

Even if you pulled out a map of the United States, try as hard as you might, she never agreed on a probable location.

Once, in a state of inebriated amusement, I taped a huge map of the United States to a wall in our apartment. Taf took a seat on the couch, and watched as I clumsily threw darts at the map in a vain attempt to pin point validity to her history. The darts stuck, but none of the locations matched.

When I woke from my liquor dreams, I realized my folly and spent the next two days refinishing the wall to keep our landlord happy.

The only thing that remained consistent with Taf was her mother. According to Taf, her mom had three husbands, and each one had the notable trait of being filthy rich.

Chapter 14

The guy I punched met with a lawyer. He wanted me to pay for his doctor's visit, and to make matters worse, he accused me of being a suitcase pimp and Taf my whore.

"He's insane!" declared Taf, throwing down the letter his lawyer sent to me. "He needs locked up!"

For several minutes, I stood at the apartment door watching her pace back and forth across the

room. Flicking my cigarette to the breeze, I stepped inside and picked up the letter.

"This is not cool, Ian. This is bad. This is real bad."

"It'll blow over, Taf. It's just a letter."

"It's from an attorney!"

"It'll be okay!" I snapped.

Taf froze. It struck me instantly how bad it was for her. She rushed to the couch and curled up like a child frightened by a storm.

Without words, I walked over to her and tapped the letter against her knee.

Like sex, our fights were rare, but when they happened, they hurt worse than a paper cut.

Chapter 15

It never occurred to me how vulnerable we

were. Taf and I were no saints. We never pretended to be perfect, but we knew the value of privacy, and I knew Taf valued hers more than most.

It might sound strange to an outsider, but she lived in a constant fear of someone ruining her life by finding out she posed nude online for money. The letter from the attorney confirmed and enhanced it.

For the next day or so, she tuned out the world. A week later, she tossed out the saddle and began to dismantle her cam room.

A deep panic set in. She ran an anxiety fever, refused to go into the cam room, and began to talk about wanting a new apartment.

“Just look at the headlines,” she shouted. “People are cruel!”

PART ii

Chapter 16

We broke free of our rental agreement, and in the dead of night, hit the road for a place to start fresh.

Before leaving, I stopped by the club to toss out my farewell to Jim. His calm, cool demeanor changed the moment I did. He stood up from the bar as if he wanted to fight and told me to forget about using his name for a reference for a job because I failed to leave without proper notice.

Over in the corner of the room I noticed Harry noticing me. He held up a drink as if to toast, and I rushed over.

"I couldn't help but hear you're leaving," he said.

"Yeah, heading out tonight. Taf's waiting on me."

"Good lookin' girl," he commented. "Nice figure." Harry leaned back and shoved his hand into his pocket. He pulled out some folded bills. "Take it," he said, holding the money up to me. It was tempting, but my heart, the part still open to caring, refused. "Take it," he insisted. "Don't lose what you don't know you got."

Chapter 17

As we drove out of the city I took a quick glance in the rear view. My life was not old, but once again, I abandoned ship while at sea. My face had the look. The cigarettes, the beer, the drama – aged me from twenty-seven to forty-seven. Behind me was a whirlwind of chaos blending into the bobbing headlights. Beside me, curled up with her head resting against the passenger window was Taf. She was asleep. The adrenaline rush flushed out, and for the first time in many days, she felt a sober peace.

Chapter 18

Between us, Taf and I had a few thousand dollars, enough to start fresh but not have longevity. Thanks to sweet ole Harry and his strip club money, we had the cash to make it a few hundred miles out of the city. My poor, decrepit car guzzled gas like my gaping mouth on a bender, but it took the money and put it to good use allowing the used hunk of metal to cruise us into a small town nestled in the woods of a burgeoning mountain range.

The town's name was like any other. Its look – straight out of the 1950s.

I missed the city immediately. Two boring sidewalks on a main street was no match for a bustling pavement where hustlers, pimps, and staggering has-beens pushed their way around. Less than a week in, I wanted to split for greener pastures, but Taf wanted to stay. Her beauty and

personality worked to her advantage. Whereas I smoldered looking for an opportunity that did not require breaking a knuckle jarring sweat, she easily became a fixture at a small bookstore and soon an employee.

You might say it was a test. Patience is a virtue, but so to is locking yourself down with an invisible chain. It was everything in my power not to escape, and there were nights where I laid in bed thinking how to do it, but when I did, I thought of Taf. She might not have loved me. She might not of cared, but in her dreaming hours she rolled over and wrapped her arm across my chest as if I were a pillow.

Chapter 19

Employment finally found me in the form of unloading boxes in a warehouse hotter than an oven.

It was a terrible job, but I needed the money, and the guys I worked with drank beer and smoked cigarettes. They drank so much they came to work hungover, and while at work, they smoked so much it made me feel they were held together with nothing but tar and barley.

They shouted out things like, “Hurry up! I ain’t got all day,” or said things like, “I’m white. I didn’t know you guys weren’t.”

As I did at the strip club, I learned to overlook the most offensive, foul disgusting attributes of humanity nor did I join in. I wanted to separate myself from the bully mouthing because I had no idea how long I might be there. I also put on a good face for Taf. Sure, I came home drunk more than a few nights, but that was nothing out of the norm. If she asked about work, I just gave her the usual nothing much of a day comments and plopped down on the couch to unwrap a cheeseburger.

Chapter 20

Our new apartment was nothing like the one we left behind in the city. Located above an old clothing store, it had a view of the main street below, and that was it.

To get up to the apartment you had to climb a steep incline of steps through what felt like a miner's tunnel, and once at the top stand precariously on a small flat perch hoping you would not fall and tumble back down as you fumbled for your keys.

The hallway was a nightmare, but the apartment felt cozy. It was large with a high ceiling and reminded me of work because it was once a warehouse for the clothing store or whatever business existed below.

A fact I learned quickly about our small town was it was full of warehouses. Some were in use by factories and others by people looking for a place to

live.

Both sides of the main street were two levels with stores on the bottom and apartments on top – places for shoppers and for sleepers.

One day, I came home to our apartment to find Lane, the bookstore owner, sitting on the couch flipping through a magazine.

"Where's Taf?" I asked.

"She's out."

"Out?" I continued, "Out for what?"

No sooner had I asked the question, did the door to the apartment burst open with Taf cradling a sack of groceries.

She looked at me and said, "Somebody didn't go shopping."

"I forgot."

"You were drunk, Ian!" She bee-lined to the

kitchen.

Lane seemed nice. I had no problem with him, but he flipped a page and made a comment about my drinking. By instinct I looked at him and wanted to say something, but instead, I entered the kitchen.

Taf placed the bag of groceries on the table, said something, and I said nothing.

Turning away, I walked back into the living room. When I entered, Lane looked up and asked, “Do you miss living in the city?”

Chapter 21

That night, just like in the movies, a cool rain moved in on the town. Unable to sleep, I kicked off the insomnia and raised a window in the living room.

When Taf found me, I was next to the open window, smoking and flicking ashes to the sidewalk below. And just like in the movies, the faint glow of street lamps lit half my body.

From where I stood, she looked sexy in the shadows – a white t-shirt covering her breast and between her legs her valley of pleasure peaking out.

"Come back to bed," she begged.
"Why'd you tell Lane we came from the city?"
"He asked," she replied. "Come back to bed."

Chapter 22

To make extra money, Taf took on a part-time job working at a small clothing store down the street from our apartment. The extra cash was nice, but she was never home, and I got bored.

With only a few streets to stroll, I began spending my evenings wandering about in search of

something to do. That something to do turned into my discovery of a small tavern where beer guzzling locals bellied up for brew.

It was a truck driver hangout kind of place with classic rock and country music. Loggers and freight haulers stopped in for food. Old drunks missing fingers from years of bad carpentry called it home.

I immediately missed the strip club and came to believe I was in a mode of punishment for something in my past.

But the beer at the tavern was cold, its cheeseburgers greasy, and everybody smoked.

Sometimes, one of the guys from the warehouse stumbled in. The tavern had a pool table, and we wasted our time before bed knocking back bottles until the pool table looked like a place to take a long drunkard's nap.

When I arrived home from the bar, the climb up the staircase was akin to ascending a mountain. I made marks on the wall from leaning against it and sliding my way up, and over time our landlord noticed. She complained, and I had to paint the walls.

One morning, I woke on the couch to find a note on my chest. It was from Taf and read, “Look at the clock.” I did.

I was late for work.

Chapter 23

There is no humiliation like pretending you care about losing a job you never wanted. The moment I stepped into the factory, the guys took notice.

“Lookie there,” one said. “I thought I was

working with white people."

"Oh, yeah," I replied, "Well, I thought I was working with civilized humans not a bunch of racists."

Laughter and anger followed. I ran to the office of the boss and rammed in like an avalanche through a forest.

"Shut that door!" he shouted.

Behind the desk, Grant, a man with a mustache and chip on his shoulder from a bitter divorce looked up at me.

"You're fired, Ian. Get outta of here."
"I need the job."
"And I need men!"
"Don't I get a warning?"
"No!"

Grant pointed to the door.

Through the office window I saw the whole warehouse crew eyeing me down.

“Come on, Grant. If I go out there, they’ll get me.”

“Go!” he ordered.

Chapter 24

That evening, Taf found me on the couch nursing my wounds with a warm beer.

She stood before me as if her only goal in the universe was to figure out how bad my life truly was.

“Let me guess, Ian. You got fired.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“It’s not my job,” she replied.

I watched her exit the room and return

moments later shirtless and wearing nothing but a pair of light blue panties.

She walked over to the window and peered down to the street.

Chapter 25

Without a job, I felt like a bum. There was Taf working two jobs and me day-after-day roaming about the tiny town in search of employment.

News of my leaving the factory traveled fast.

Nobody wanted to hire me.

The tavern turned me away.

I felt like a prisoner on a remote island left to pray for death.

Weeks went by with me growing ever more

poor and Taf grew cold. Each night, she came home expecting to find me on the couch with a beer between my legs. When she did, she said nothing.

By the second month, not working really took a toll. My hair was longer. My face was a stubble mess.

Gradually, I reduced myself to an apartment parasite waiting to feast off Taf's precious earnings.

Had the town not been too small to be homeless, I had took to the streets with tucked in legs and a soup can for begging change.

Soon the days drifted from one to the other without me knowing the dates.

I had never gone more than a few weeks without a job.

My life unraveled.

Then...

It all came to a head one night when passed out on the couch, I burned up in a fever of sweat. I dreamt of Taf sitting on the couch wearing a purple shirt and blue jean skirt. When I walked in, she had her arms folded. Without warning, the dream shifted to us standing on a gravel road in the darkest of nights. The headlights of a car shined on us and Taf stood before me with this relaxed posed. There was no sound – no words, but there was an intense feeling of it being the end, the end of the road – the end of us.

I woke from the dream.

I needed a cigarette.

I needed to escape.

Chapter 26

Two heads are better than one, but one is cheaper to feed. I made up my mine to leave.

When Taf came home from work, I gave her the news. I also gave her my car. It was a rusting hunk of junk, but I figured she might sell it to buy a new used car. When I told her to, “buy a new used car,” she chuckled. It was the first time in months she laughed naturally at something I said.

That evening we stayed up late watching an old movie. For a few hours the past we shared dropped in, but it left as fast as it visited.

By morning I found myself alone. Taf was at work, and on my chest was a note.

On the kitchen table she left me traveling money.

PART iii

Chapter 27

I used the money Taf gave me to limp my way back to the city. Once in town, I found myself frantically searching for work. My big fear was wet dog aroma or what I called street stench. So I did my best to keep up my appearances and panhandled to pay for a flop house motel room where the manager let me pay by the day.

To say it was my first time being flat busted was a soft lie, but to say it was my first time frightened by the prospect of being a permanent resident of the sidewalks was a cold hard truth. It terrified me to think of living the rest of my days on the streets, and I knew the longer I stayed out in the weather the greater the risk of it bolting down tight on the invisible chain of perpetual failure.

So sucking in my pride, I hobbled my way back to the strip club and hoped for mercy.

Chapter 28

I was nervous entering the club, but it felt good. Old thoughts rushed at me as too did the familiar faces of those who remembered.

At the strip club, I spotted Jim before he spotted me. He was deep in concentration writing on a notepad. A tap from the bartender startled his attention, and he turned to look at me.

"You back?" he asked.

"I'm looking for work, Jim. You got any?"

He returned to the notepad. "Where's Taf?"

"I left her."

He paused for a moment and said, "Too bad." Then, he finished with the note and stood up. "She could've of been your meal ticket."

As he walked away, I felt my soul drop and my hand reach for a cigarette. Sitting down on a stool, I

palmed a light and tried not to let the pooling tears in my eyes show.

From the shadows a hand waved to me. It was Harry. He held up his drink and motioned for me to sit with him.

Taking a strong drag, I strolled over and stood at the edge of his table.

"Life treating you well?" he asked.

"I'm broke Harry. Got no money for a drink and barely enough for this cigarette."

"Have a seat. I'll order you a beer."

Chapter 29

Harry and I talked for a few hours. The beer flowed through me and so did his words. He spoke about his life, his time in Europe, his travels, his world, and his love for women which he summed up as, "I got something to show you if you have the time."

Chapter 30

We stepped out of the club close to midnight, cigarettes in hand, and a feeling of a mission before us.

Harry paced ahead of me, the air of night catching the tails of his jacket as he hurried along the sidewalk.

As he approached a polished land yacht cruising car, he pressed a button, and its lights chirped.

Chapter 31

The first thing Harry did was lower his window.

The next thing he did was turn on fast beat, 1960s jazz.

He drove quickly but sanely through the city.

The car gently rose up and down with the dips in the asphalt.

He smoked and stared at the road.

Everything about him was cool.

Harry was in his element and through the drive, I kept thinking, *For a drunk, he had the skills of a professional drinker who learned patience is not just a virtue but necessity for navigating life.*

His calm demeanor made me feel at ease. I expected no wrecks or trouble.

Chapter 32

Whatever Harry had to show me was in one of the poorest parts of the city.

On the way, I watched the familiar world of well kept businesses fade into a gray, blending mass of stores in decay.

We were in the nightly report section of the city – the place where local news channels get their footage of arson fires, vicious crime, and screaming shooting victims.

It was late when we rolled past the alley's of death, but the street they connected to were as lively as if Noon. Stoned walkers and synthetic insomniacs roamed about with no purpose other than to remain in motion.

Back in the city, back in the lights, the prostitutes wore costumes and flare to attract, but here in the shadows of despair the attraction was merely standing up in blue jeans and a stained shirt.

I took my eyes off my window and turned to

Harry. He paid no attention to the world passing by. He just smoked and steered.

smoked

and steered...

Chapter 33

At the curb where Harry parked, we might as well been on the Moon. We were officially in the heart of the inferno – miles away from the strip club and deep behind enemy lines.

An empty street, devoid of street lamp light and lined with tall buildings stretched out before me. The street vanished into darkness, and I felt trapped in the shadow of impending doom.

Harry pushed open the car door and got out. He sensed my apprehension and leaned down to say, “Nobody’s gonna mess with you here.”

Chapter 34

A flick of a light switch caused a large storage room packed with pallets of boxes to come to light. Large industrial shelves stood around me. On the shelves were more boxes, and as I walked I began to realize the shelves had thousands of DVDs stacked up as if in a library.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"This is what I do," replied Harry. He tapped a cigarette out and lit it. Then, he strolled ahead of me. "I supply adult bookstores with movies, sex toys..."

"Everything?" I questioned.

Harry stopped. "Yes, everything."

Chapter 35

The entire time I took Harry for a drunk, possibly a retired businessman, maybe a banker, but

a drunk nonetheless, and yet he had this prize possession tucked away in the lower depths of life's misery. Harry called it a lucrative business. I called it a ton of porn.

His reason for showing me the movie warehouse was to offer me a job managing it, and when I told him I knew nothing about running an adult bookstore or anything remotely related he cut me off and said, "You know how to work a computer. You need the money." And when I asked why me he replied, "The guy who ran it quit. I need someone to run it." I then proceeded to say, "I know nothing about inventory. What if I mess up?" He smiled and said nothing.

Chapter 36

Harry and I worked out a deal to have one of his helpers pick me up each morning.

The more I learned about Harry, I learned he

had several guys employed in various activities and an entire crew of guys on call to help in the warehouse.

So I began my mornings stepping out of my flop house motel to catch a ride in a pickup truck with a big burly Russian guy who went by the name Clifton.

Clifton drank beer hidden in a paper sack.

Unlike Harry, he drove stupidly crazy, running stop signs and red lights while swerving through traffic.

“You’re gonna get us killed!” I shouted.

Clifton just laughed (sometimes happily howling) at my pleas for him to slow down but somehow, as if protected by an amazing force, we arrived at the warehouse. And once there, he spent most of the day sitting in a recliner chair drinking

beer and watching TV while I tried to take orders and figure out the inventory program on Harry's computer.

The peculiar thing about Clifton is he drank but did not smoke, and if I smoked around him he complained in his thick Russian accent, "You're gonna kill me with dat smoke. Get dat smoke outta here!" And I replied, "Not if you kill us both first with your driving." Whenever I said it, Clifton yelled, "Get away! Get away from me. You wanna drink beer with me you American slob, then you get dat smoke away from me!"

Chapter 37

Harry's warehouse had just about everything imaginable to run an adult bookstore, and I quickly learned adult bookstores came in two varieties.

Some sold exclusively to couples, women, and gay men. They were what Harry called the new

breed of porn store – stores opened up in the wake of heavy censorship and by people who feared the wrath of heavy handed regulations. These stores mainly carried run of the mill sex toys and lingerie. If they sold any DVDs, they were limited, over priced, and by hardcore standards boring. They made up the bulk of our clients and were located in the rural areas and urban shopping centers. They were our bread'n butter stores and predictable. Their orders were as dull as a weekly delivery to a grocery store. They seldom shook things up, and sometimes I sent them the same order they received two months earlier.

Harry told me a lot of these stores had college students running them while the owner lived hundreds of miles away playing golf and making money off a dozen other stores like the one sending the order. They were cookie cutter by design – simple to run and built not to stand out like a cold sore in a modeling contest.

And then there were the other stores catering to what Harry called, “the collector class.” These stores sold in bulk and at discount prices. Items they sold varied from week-to-week so collectors loved these places because they never knew what they might find. I thought of them as thrift stores for the porn connoisseur. They were rare, located mainly in cities, and not many cities had them. Yet, when they purchased from us, they bought massive amounts of content, and unlike the smaller stores appealing to weekend lovers, they stayed in touch. Some of these stores called every week to check and see if Harry had anything new for them, and that was another thing. They knew Harry by name. The guys and gals who ran these stores were on a first name basis. When they called, they asked questions like, “So, how you been?” and “Have you seen so and so?” Half the time, I had no clue who so and so was, but as time progressed I began to realize Harry had a history with these people. They wanted to make money but also wanted to know how, “the old timer was doing.” I felt awkward speaking for him

and brought it up.

"They ask questions about you. I can't answer all of them because I don't know anything about you."

Harry smiled and tamped out his cigarette in the ashtray. "You're doing a good job, Ian. They like you." Then, he pulled out his wallet and placed two large bills of money on the table.

I leaned forward. "What's this?"

"A raise."

Chapter 38

With the extra money Harry gave me, I managed to get a small, single occupant efficiency apartment. Built fifty years in the past, it showed wear, but it was safe and clean.

It was the kind of place perfect for an artist, writer, or person wanting seclusion. In that apartment I found a kind of peace I had not

experienced in years, and I began thinking more about Taf.

I still had the number of the bookstore she worked, but I kept myself from calling it. Whatever Taf and I were, we were never a couple. We were a thing – an entity of companionship.

More than once, I found myself chuckling at my state of affairs. When I was with Taf and working at the strip club, the site of a continuous stream of naked women did nothing to me. Now that I was working for Harry and surrounded by images of glamorized nudity, the same held true.

The more I thought about it, the more I came to the conclusion that what made Taf and I connect was my lack of lusting for her. She wanted to make money with her body. The last thing she needed was a guy hanging around who spent all his time salivating over her amazing body.

And at times, I thought about that body.

It would be a lie if I said the memory of Taf did not arouse me. It did, but there was more to it than a long shower. Taf had settled into my heart. She was deep inside a special place. Part of me wanted to call it love, but love scared me.

I fear love like a vampire does sunlight.

No, I preferred to think of Taf as a friend, a companion – a help mate. She used me for protection, and I guess in ways I used her as well. It felt good when she walked into the strip club with me. She was in a way an advertisement to the world that shouted, “Hey! I might not have it all together, but I got this amazingly beautiful female standing next to me. So I got to have something going for me.”

Chapter 39

One day, Clifton and I showed up at the warehouse to find two empty unmarked police cars parked in the street.

The big Russian, turned off the motor and asked, “You got all your ducks in row?”

I pushed open the door of the pickup truck. Everything around us felt tense. Maybe it always existed, but something felt strange about the day.

Clifton chugged down the last of his beer and belched loudly before tossing the can into the bed of his truck.

“You know about this?” I asked, as we walked to the warehouse.

“They come to check papers. Just like back home.”

He grinned.

I was not amused.

Chapter 40

Inside the warehouse we found Harry in the office watching two men hover paperwork on my desk.

"They've come to inspect our product," said Harry, lighting a cigarette. The men gazed up at me. Harry sensed my concern and continued with, "They won't be long."

He walked over to me and placed his hand on my shoulder. Leading me out of the room he said, "Government detectives. They come around every so often to check things over. It's part of the business. Don't worry about it. My lawyer takes care of everything."

A few paces into our stroll, Harry stopped and stood in front of me. "Taf's back in town," he said,

placing the cigarette between his lips to fetch his wallet. “She came by the club looking for you.” From the wallet he plucked a folded note and handed it to me. “Get Clifton to give you a ride.”

PART iv

Chapter 41

The note directed me to Sandra’s apartment.

After parking, I told Clifton to wait in the truck, but he insisted on following me to Sandra’s door.

When the door opened, Sandra stood stoned faced staring at the large man behind me.

“He’s harmless,” I said. “Where’s she at?”

Taf heard my voice. She stepped out of a backroom. Months passed since we seen each other,

but the short time took a toll. She looked rough, used, and lost.

Without a word, she rushed to me and yanked me inside.

I turned to Clifton and said, “You wait.”

The large man ignored me and entered.

Sandra, still in shock, backed up. “He’s harmless,” I repeated as Taf dragged me to a bedroom. “Harmless!”

Chapter 42

Poor Taf. Life in the tiny town after my leaving proved a nightmare. Her boss at the bookstore sensed an opportunity in my absence and began to extort her.

“He found my webcam videos online,” sobbed

Taf. “He threatened to tell people about them.”

She gave me the dirty details. They all boiled down to one thing. Lane was a scumbag of the worst kind. He not only wanted sex from Taf but also to make money off her. So he concocted a scheme to pimp her out to truckers passing through town, but before he had the chance, she jumped in my old rust bucket of a car and hightailed it back to the city.

Without a cellphone to make calls ahead of her arrival, she showed up at Sandra’s apartment without warning.

“And without a number to call,” she continued. “I went to the strip club and left a note for Jim to have you call me.”

With a mind-racing nod, I rose from the bed.

“What are you doing now, Ian?”

"I'm working for Harry."

"Who's that?"

"The guy who got the note."

Chapter 43

Taf caught a ride with us back to the warehouse. Clifton slurped a beer from a paper sack and drove like a man with no care for human life. He weaved in and out of traffic forcing both Taf and myself to brace ourselves as he maneuvered the lanes at a high rate of speed.

His drinking (not speed) alarmed Taf, and she commented, "You know that's illegal?"

She clung to the dash waiting for a reply, but all Clifton did was laugh.

She turned to me and asked, "Why aren't you smoking? You always smoke. This would be an opportune time to light up."

"I can't stand dat smoke!" exclaimed Clifton.

"He can't stand dat smoke," I replied. "Besides, I'm used to it."

As odd as it might sound, Clifton's horrific driving skills no longer frightened me. In fact, if he changed and drove sober, I might think something wrong. I might not even want to ride with him.

Chapter 44

By the time we arrived at the warehouse, the agents were gone.

Harry greeted Taf with a gentile caress, and then pulled me to the side for a private conversation.

He told me some business clients were paying a visit. They were friends from his old days – guys

who ran collector class stores.

I heard Harry say they were big spenders, but my mind registered him saying, “connected.”

One look at Harry’s operation, and you realized he had help in getting it. If he answered to someone, I might be on the path to meeting them.

Chapter 45

There’s something about my personality that drags me into situations best left alone. By sheer chance, I landed the job at the strip club because the DJ to go on that was in jail, and Jim liked the sound of my voice.

That first night in the booth, Jim gave me a crash course in the high art of strip club announcing.

I learned how to power up the amp.

Adjust the EQ.

Switch out the songs in the CD player.

To work the buttons that controlled the stage lights.

And place my mouth over the mic to catch the bass from my throat.

“The trick is to not get bored,” said Jim. “Announce the girls as though you were hosting a game show. Be upbeat and don’t drink too much.”

Two weeks into the job, I had the DJ booth routine down pat. Five weeks later, I stumbled in like a robot designed from spare parts, yet Jim kept me on because I showed up and never once passed out in the booth.

Now, Harry wanted me to meet his friends.

He liked me. He trusted me, and it scared me.

My fear was not letting him down.

My fear was not getting out.

It was one thing to run inventory and send the orders, but another to shake hands with guys deeply entrenched.

The more I thought about it, the more my mind tried to come up with reasons to adjust.

Chapter 46

Taf was a frazzled mess.

Once in my apartment, she stripped down naked and crawled into my bed. When I moved in to hold her, she elbowed me out.

So like in the tiny town, the couch waited.

I grabbed a beer, the remote to the TV, and plopped down.

A few hours later, I opened my eyes to find Taf still naked but staring down at me.

She climbed onto me and straddled. Slowly she began to grind her crotch against the bulge of my blue jeans.

The sensation of having my cock rubbed by her firm body was enough to cause me to feel the warm oozing up inside me.

Grabbing her hips, I pulled her down onto me.

Her breathing intensified.

The grinding increased.

Soon the dry bulge of my jeans was a moist mound of desire working it's way into her.

The pain of rubbing.

The pain of penance.

The pain of the burning sensation overpowered us.

As she moved her hips faster I looked up to see tears pooling in her eyes. Those tears spellbound me. I felt lost in them and could not take my eyes off them.

Soon we both were in our own dry humping rhythm.

Grinding and binding our thoughts with a blend of lust and power.

Taf arched her back, and I lifted her up,

burying my face between her legs – my eyes watching the ocean of her stomach churn the waves as the salt of her seas touched my lips.

Feasting on her middle, she gasped and looked down – held the expression for a few quivering seconds then trembled into an easy falling off.

Chapter 47

Taf and I were once again in the middle of contemplation.

I spent my days at the warehouse.

She spent her days curled up with books.

She never looked for a job, and I never asked her to. Harry paid me enough for us to live a poor simple life.

Our days turned into a cozy pattern of me rising early for work and Taf lounging about the apartment reading one book after the other.

She read everything and talked about things my porn burned out mind failed to understand.

Sometimes I came home to find she cooked dinner. Other times, we went out to places we went when we lived in the apartment next to Sandra.

Sometimes Sandra came along, and when she did, Taf and Sandra almost as if on purpose ended the night strolling naked about the apartment as I sipped beers.

Chapter 48

One day, I came home to find Taf tapping away at the base of the couch on a ribbon typewriter.

It was an old school typewriter with a chrome arm for slamming the paper back in place. I had never seen Taf type, and, though she knew how, she had to get used to the keyboard requiring some finger strength to push down the keys.

She complained wildly about the pain she felt after a few minutes of typing but eased her frustration by recalling what a customer in the bookstore she worked at in the tiny town told her. “Typewriters are work. They’re heavy and unforgiving, but if you take your time they’ll give you a great story.” So armed with this abstract knowledge, she sat about writing essays.

One of the essays she wrote was about how social media sites make their money hiding behind special laws designed only for them. Taf saw the entire thing as a racket, and when I told Harry about the essay, he chuckled and said, “It is, but you’ll not get anybody to admit it.”

Harry had a real affection for Taf. I never got the impression he wanted to sleep with her, but I did get the impression he wanted to see her naked.

Whenever she came around, he dropped subtle hints about how she reminded him of Greek statues, and one day presented her with a small nude statue made of brass. He bragged it was by a famous sculptor in Europe. “One of a kind,” said Harry.

Taf smiled and placed the statue on her writing desk – another oddity of the glorious past she discovered while shopping a rust smelling antique store.

The writing desk had a hole in it for an ink well, and the statue covered the hole nicely.

Chapter 49

As Taf typed, I continued to spend my days at

the warehouse.

Making deals.

Making calls.

Making friends in the adult bookstore business.

And with my old car back, Clifton no longer had to give me rides to and from.

This meant a new kind of freedom laid siege to me. Slowly, I began to feel like I had before Taf and I made our escape to the tiny town. The city opened up. Independence took me firmly by the hand and gave it a good shake.

Soon I found myself tramping down past-life sidewalks where hustlers and misfits rushed to me in the hopes of scoring.

It was in this roaming about mood that I learned something.

A mile or so outside the city was a 1970s motel up for sale. The owner recently died. His family wanted to sell it, and the price seemed fair.

Having this information, an idea came to me that I ran by Harry who thought it had possibilities.

My idea was to convert the motel into safe space rooms for webcam models to practice their trade.

As I explained it to Harry, “It’ll have high speed Internet and give the models something they want – security.”

Yet, when I ran the idea by Taf, she hesitated. She stood up from her writing desk and walked to the couch. Plopping down, she looked up at me.

"You want me to webcam?" she asked.

"No," I replied, sitting down next to her. "Harry and I will put it together. You can manage it."

"Like a pimp!" she shouted.

Before I knew it, she was on one of her classic rants – walking from room to room until finally settling back to me.

It might sound strange, but there was a part of me that knew she had interest in the idea. So I relaxed and let her talk. In the process, the voice of opportunity came knockin' on her noggin, and she wore herself out.

Not wanting a heated debate, she strolled back to the writing desk. "I've been typing all day," she said. "You wanna hear what I wrote?"

For the next few hours, I listened to Taf read from the pages she typed. As she read, I sipped beers and stirred a soup on the stove.

Even though I lacked the book knowledge to understand what she wrote, I had appreciation for it. The passion in which she read caused me more than once to lean against the counter and pause on a thought.

By the time she finished, the soup was ready and so was I with a question, “Do you like the idea?”

PART v

Chapter 50

Fives year later.

My early thirties.

Taf’s late twenties.

Both of us intertwined in the world of Harry now ran by his son Eddie who flies in every so often

to check on the family business.

The motel is a bustle with girls.

It smells of coconut oil and jasmine.

Sometimes a girl runs naked through the hallway.

Most times they're laughing and wiping off sweat.

Sometimes they breakdown and cry.

When they cry, Taf rushes to them – her goal to comfort and give hope.

With the extra money, Taf and I moved into a bigger apartment.

We are not rich but no longer feeling the grind of the hustle.

I purchased a new used car she drives to work.

Harry is on permanent vacation, and I am knee deep in invoices and cigarette butts.

Chapter 51

To say the day-to-day operations of the warehouse are hectic is an understatement.

My life has a repetitive rhythm similar to a that of a constant drip from a leaking faucet.

I wake.

I shower.

I rush to my office.

After work, I swing by the motel, check on Taf, drop off any supplies the girls might need, then

cruise home where I wait for Taf to stroll in, strip down to nothing, and spend the rest of her evening typing while I relax on the couch slurping warm beers.

I love warm beer.

“It go down smooood,” says Clifton.

Taf loves to write and sometimes crawls into bed with something she tapped out.

I enjoy hearing her read.

It relaxes me more than the beer, and I fall to sleep while she reads.

She has a book in the works on the ethics of technology and rise of the webcam model.

My simple mind cannot understand her philosophical paths.

She talks a hundred miles an hour about new laws, new legislation, and stuff that makes my mind ache.

Still I know she is happy. There is a mood about her – a frantic high. Her fingers are faster on the keys. Her mind is sharp. She is considered by the girls a confident, a supporter, and friend.

She sees the motel as more than a place for young women to make money showing off their bodies. It is a refuge, and Taf talks about expanding what we offer.

A few of the girls want to do more than webcamming.

Taf has the idea to convert a large unused storage room behind the motel into a movie studio. She wants me to use my connections to make it possible.

From dusk to dawn, I am washed in chatter about the possibilities, and when I cast doubt or feel it not worth the heat it might bring, Taf reminds me of the money we both stand to make if it all works out.

And, she pulls me back in.

Chapter 52

Fifty rooms with nude girls draws attention.

To open the motel, we had to convince the city we were not pimps.

Now, we have to convince the pimps we mean business.

Like vultures waiting for a meal, they roost outside the metal fence we installed to protect the building.

To head off any problems, I asked Clifton to recruit some of his friends – big tough guys who look menacing from a distance.

The idea is a good one.

But it works too well.

The three to four men patrolling the building attracted the eyes of law enforcement, and the city began to suspect we had more than webcamming going on.

It took time and lawyer money to convince the city we were a legitimate business, but our battle had just begun.

Wind of our problems got out to activists. They camped out in front of the fence and refused to leave when asked.

Unlike the pimps, who feared retribution from a crowbar, the activist feared the weather. When it rained, they left. When it warmed up, they returned.

A buddy I made in the porn store business told me to leave them alone. “They’ll wear themselves out,” he said. “One day you’ll show up, and they’ll be gone.”

He was right. One day they left.

Months went buy without hearing anything against the motel.

Then the email came.

Chapter 53

Anonymity is the muse of freedom.

Chapter 54

I was in the back of the warehouse watching Clifton slurp down a beer when the call from Taf came in.

At the motel, I found her curled up into a unmanageable ball of emotion.

Unable to speak, she pointed at the computer screen.

Leaning in, I scrolled the email's text.

"It's nothing," I said. "Forget about it."

"Forget about it? You want me to forget about it? Are you insane?"

I dug into my pocket for a cigarette. "What's the big deal, Taf? They got some vids of you. It happens. I bet half the girls we got working here have dealt with this. Talk to them."

She wanted to here none of it.

I lit my cigarette and plopped down into a chair.

Silence embraced the room – so much silence filled up the space the hiss of the air conditioning began to work on my nerves.

"This is stupid!" I snapped, jumping up from the chair. "You're gonna let this get to you. Where's the confident Taf I know – the girl fighting for the rights of the oppressed webcammer?"

"That's not funny, Ian," she said, wiping a tear.

"You're right," I apologized, sitting down beside her, "but neither is this. Those girls out there need you. You gotta get a hold of yourself."

She turned to me and said, "Take me home."

Chapter *55*

As much as Taf wanted to be part of the excitement of the sex worker business, the deep

seated fear of someone exposing her identity to the world remained. It lived in a cave in the back of her mind making a low purring growl akin to a thrum. At times, it came out of the cave to look around. Today, it came at her full throttle – charging with a demonic grin to paralyze her with a feeling of doom.

As I drove, she stared out the window.

Once in the apartment, she raced to the bedroom and slammed the door shut.

My heart reached for the door, but my hand pulled back.

Chapter 56

"The sad limping dog walks the dusty road with a low head searching for a friend," read the note I found on the table after coming home from work to find the apartment empty and Taf's closet

empty.

I took the note to the couch.

There I sat in thoughts.

My day began as others.

It ended alone.

Taf left me only the note and her memory.

There is no need to find her, I told myself.

She's on the run from the anonymous threat.

Somewhere.

Out there.

She is.

THE END